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13 The Positive Role of Islam in Indian History and Nehru's *The Discovery of India*

In August 1942, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) returned to prison for the ninth and final time, beginning a nearly three-year stay at Ahmednagar jail, during which he was largely cut off from the convulsions that were shaking India and the entire world. Yet prison was not without its benefits. Prison, for instance, gave him time to reflect and indulge in his passion for gardening. Above all, however, it was an opportunity for him to read and write away from the hectic chaos of the Indian independence movement or, later, of leading the world's largest democracy. During his time as India's prime minister – a post he would hold from the time of independence in 1947 until his death in 1964 – he would remark, only half-jokingly, that he wished that he were still dispatched to jail to read and write more.[1] Supplied with books by friends and family, he read an eclectic combination of literature, history, and philosophy in prison. He read Plato, Henry David Thoreau, Marcel Proust, Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the 19th-century Hindu reformer Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), as well as works on Indian history, including Edward Thompson's *The Making of the Indian Princes*, *The Cambridge History of India*, and Henry Elliot's *The History of India*, a translated collection of medieval Persian accounts of Indian history.[2] Prevented from taking part in Indian politics in the present, Nehru pondered India's past as well as its future and drew from his readings to consider the meaning of India's past. The product of his reflections on India during his time at Ahmednagar was his third and final book, *The Discovery of India*. In it, Nehru grappled with a basic question: What is India? And what defines it as a nation?

Many dismissed the idea that an Indian nation had ever existed. "India," Winston Churchill once sarcastically remarked, is simply "a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator."[3] British imperialists found in

1 Sunil Khilnani, "Introduction," in Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), xix.

2 Ibid., xxi-ii. In particular, Bergson's *Creative Evolution* had a profound impact on Nehru's view of history, leading him to view creative cultural syncretism as the defining characteristic of Indian history.

3 Winston Churchill, *India: Speeches and an Introduction* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1931), 136.

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this view a useful excuse for continuing their rule over the subcontinent, and they saw the Raj as the only glue holding the lands of the Indian subcontinent together. By seeking to "discover" the Indian nation and define it, Nehru was attempting to put together a historical narrative of Indian history to undergird the idea of a cohesive Indian nation – a nation that was to be soon represented by an independent Indian state. Hence, although *The Discovery of India* does not advance any specific political program for India, it is nonetheless a fundamentally political work. If nations are fundamentally imagined political communities, as the historian Benedict Anderson has persuasively argued, Nehru's goal in writing *The Discovery of India* becomes clear. Out of the immense ethnic and religious diversity of the Indian subcontinent, Nehru sought to imagine a united Indian nation into being.[4]

This attempt to imagine an Indian nation did not mean papering over differences among Indians, be they cultural, religious, or linguistic. Indeed, it was its diverse mosaic of peoples and influences that defined India for Nehru. The India imagined by Nehru in *The Discovery of India* is characterized by a syncretic culture of tolerance and openness that embraced a variety of influences – peoples, cultures, languages, and faiths – that on the surface appear to be vastly different. The treatment of one particular part of this syncretic culture, Islam and India's Muslim minority more generally,[5] stands out among the writings of other Hindu figures in the Indian nationalist movement. Throughout *The Discovery of India*, Nehru sought to emphasize that Islam is (or at least became) an authentically Indian religion, even if it emerged outside the Indian subcontinent. He also tried to underline the positive influence that Islam exercised on India and the myriad ways Muslims have contributed to India throughout the centuries. At the same time, he also attempted to portray problematic Muslim figures in Indian history as not representing the true, fundamentally tolerant spirit of Islam. Nehru's vision of India's past was particularly novel because of his argument that Islam is inherently democratic and tolerant and that it had become an inextricable part of Indian culture through the intellectual, artistic, and cultural currents it created or revitalized.

4 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

5 At the time of the 1901 British Indian census – which included contemporary India as well as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma – Hindus made up 70% of the population, while Muslims made up roughly 20%. After the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Hindus made up 85%, while India's Muslim minority dwindled to 10%. Today, those figures are roughly 80% and 15%, respectively.

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Nehru's vision of the relationship between India and Islam provided a subtle but firm rebuke to Muslim separatists as well as Hindu nationalists who argued that Muslims had no place in a Hindu-majority India. Nehru's attempt to emphasize the critical role Muslims have in the Indian nation was an attempt to build a non-exclusivist Indian nationalism that would permit Indians to reconcile overlapping identities. Nehru's goal was to allow Indians to be peaceably Hindu or Muslim while maintaining a common attachment to an Indian nation open and generous enough to encompass them all. At a time when populist Hindu nationalist forces seek to undo Indian secularism and reduce Indian Muslims to second-class citizens in their own country, it is worth looking back at the project that Nehru undertook in *The Discovery of India*. Narendra Modi, India's Hindu nationalist prime minister, likely loathes Nehru more than any other figure in contemporary Indian history precisely because he showed that nationalism does not have to be of the resentment-driven exclusionary Hindu nationalist variety. Modi has gone out of his way to diminish Nehru and tarnish his reputation since becoming prime minister in a way that he has not used to target any other historical Indian political figure.[6] It is not difficult to understand why Modi finds Nehru so threatening. Rather than letting the Hindu nationalist right monopolize Indian nationalism, Nehru sought to claim Indian nationalism for the secular left, creating a narrative built around tolerance and pluralism that, in his view, reflected the true meaning of India's past.

6 For example, he has diminished Nehru's role in India's democratic consolidation, saying before Parliament that "India did not become a democracy just because of Nehru, as Congress would have us believe" (7 February 2018). Moreover, he has blamed Nehru – a champion of Hindu-Muslim coexistence – for the partition of India and the ensuing violence inflicted on Hindus fleeing Pakistan, saying in another speech before Parliament that "because of someone's [i.e., Nehru's] ambition to become prime minister, a line was drawn over India and the country was divided. After partition, the way Hindus, Sikhs, and other minorities were persecuted, oppressed, and coerced in Pakistan cannot even be imagined" (6 February 2020). Besides this oblique reference, he explicitly mentioned Nehru by name twenty-one times in the same speech, which was ostensibly meant to present the government's budget for the year. Analysts have noted Modi's fixation on Nehru, with one writing that "in the same way that Trump seems bent on undoing Barack Obama's signature achievements, Modi seems obsessed with Nehru." Meena Ahamed, "Modi is Pretending to be Gandhi's Heir. He's the Exact Opposite," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2020.

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The Historical Context of *The Discovery of India*

As Nehru sat in his cell in Ahmednagar jail, his vision of India seemed to become an increasingly remote and distant dream. In the years leading up to the Second World War, the two-nation theory – the idea that Hindus and Muslims constitute two separate and distinct nations and should have separate states in the Indian subcontinent – grew in popularity. Led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), the All-India Muslim League, a party claiming to represent the interests of Indian Muslims that had grown to become the leading opposition force to Nehru's Indian National Congress (INC), increasingly agitated for the partition of India and the creation of an independent state for South Asian Muslims called Pakistan.[7] By the end of 1942, Nehru and most of the Congress leadership were in prison for their role in the Quit India movement that demanded an immediate British withdrawal from India. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), the *de facto* leader of the INC and an extremely close mentor and friend of Nehru, had started the Quit India movement in August 1942 by calling for non-violent resistance to British rule after the failure of British attempts to secure Indian support for the Allied war effort. The Muslim League, which supported the British, used the absence of major Congress leaders to build its strength, and it managed to form governments in Bengal and the Northwest Frontier Province in April 1943.[8] During a 1944 meeting between Gandhi and Jinnah, Gandhi promised a plebiscite for Muslims on remaining in India. This proposal simultaneously made Jinnah appear to be the legitimate representative of Indian Muslims and weakened more moderate figures in the Muslim League who might have been more amenable to a one-state solution.[9]

Yet the challenge to Nehru's vision of India did not only come from Muslims agitating for independence but also from Hindus as well. Even within the INC, a nominally secular party for all Indians, certain figures, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920), had called for uniting different sects of Hindus "into a mighty Hindu nation" and said that such "ought to be the ambition of every Hindu."[10] He lamented the loss of unity when India was a "self-contained country" during Vedic (i.e., pre-Islamic) times and called for the restoration of the

7 Alex Von Tunzelmann, *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire* (New York: Picador, 2007), 249.

8 Chirstophe Jaffrelot, *Le syndrome pakistanais* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 43.

9 Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 711.

10 Bal Gangadhar Tilak, "Yearning for a Hindu Nation," in *Indian Nationalism: The Essential Writings*, ed. S. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Aleph, 2017), 48.

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"unity" of the Vedic era.[11] Outside the INC, Hindu nationalist groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) adopted similar ideas and explicitly directed them against Muslims. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), a member of the RSS whose formulation of *Hindutva* (Hinduness) became the ideological foundation of the Hindu right in India, argued that those whose holy land was outside India (i.e., Muslims and Christians) were possible fifth columns and could not be trusted to put the interests of India first because of their supposed foreign allegiances.[12] The RSS has also been involved in anti-Muslim militancy since its inception, attempting to spark conflicts between Hindus and Muslims throughout the Indian subcontinent.[13] Another prominent RSS leader, M.S. Golwalkar (1906–1973), declared that to remain in India, non-Hindus "must either adopt Hindu culture and language, must learn and respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion . . . in other words they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly subjugated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen's rights."[14] (These Hindu nationalists, it should be noted, are the ideological ancestors of today's governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its right-wing populist prime minister, Narendra Modi.) It was against this backdrop of growing Muslim separatism and Hindu majoritarianism that Nehru wrote *The Discovery of India*.

Nehru's goal in writing *The Discovery of India* was to give the nascent Indian nation a sense of its identity. Nehru viewed the rise of nationalism in India as a healthy development because he saw in it a powerful force that would give Indians "a sense of common living and common purpose" and would encourage them to help bring an end to the Raj.[15] Yet *The Discovery of India* took an approach to nationalism that is noticeably different from many other contemporary nationalist works both in India and elsewhere in the world.

Nehru realized that forging a sense of national identity that included the diverse myriad of groups residing in the Indian subcontinent would be extremely difficult. Nevertheless, he saw that doing so was necessary to protect India's rich cultural tapestry from being torn apart by factionalism. Sunil Khilnani points out that among works of modern nationalism, "*The Discovery of India* is unusual in its refusal of exclusivist habits of mind, whether territorial

11 Ibid.

12 Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 2.

13 Ibid., 73.

14 M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nation Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan, 1947), 55–56.

15 Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), 44.

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or cultural, as well as in its sustained cool reflective tone."[16] The question for Nehru was not one of purifying India but rather of how to unite "utterly different groups in one social system, each group co-operating with the whole and yet retaining its own freedom to live its own life and develop itself."[17] He dwelled on the nations of Europe, with its nationalist ideologies that excluded those who did not fall within the linguistic and ethnic majority of a country, and the United States, with its severe racial inequality, as examples for India to avoid. Nehru was aware of the exclusionary precedents set by previous nationalist movements, and his determination to harness the unifying power of nationalism while minimizing its potential to divide is manifest throughout *The Discovery of India*. To break with exclusivist visions of the Indian nation, Nehru sought to create a narrative of the cultural syncretism and synthesis that, for him, defined India's past. He claimed that while "a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization," this unity was never a form of standardization imposed from above but instead was characterized by the tolerance and encouragement of different beliefs.[18]

Given the rapid rise of Hindu and Muslim nationalism as he was writing in prison, Nehru almost assuredly felt an extra degree of urgency in his project. Indeed, reading *The Discovery of India*, one can sense how deeply Nehru felt about the unity of India, which he described as not merely an abstract "intellectual conception" but rather as "an emotional experience which overpowered me."[19] Despite India's often dizzying diversity, he felt that "everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us."[20] His passion is particularly visible in one of the most famous passages in *The Discovery of India*, in which Nehru described India as

> some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. All of these existed in our conscious or subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them, and they had gone to build up the complex and mysterious personality of India.[21]

16 Khilnani, "Introduction," xxi.
17 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 270.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 52.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 51.

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For Nehru, India was thus one, as reflected by the single palimpsest, and yet it simultaneously bore the traces of successive layers of external influences and internal changes over the course of thousands of years. For Nehru, India was defined by its ability to absorb new influences and undergo transformations while remaining fundamentally the same nation.

In an example of the lack of exclusivism that Khilnani mentions, Nehru embraced the layers of change and external influences that had shaped India through the ages, rejecting all notions of racial, ethnic, or religious purity. Nehru believed that this process of continuous mixing was particularly relevant in the case of India, and he discussed at length the successive waves of peoples – Aryans, Dravidians, Turks, Semites,[22] and Mongols – who migrated to India and found a home there.[23] Nowhere was this absorption of outside influences and cultural synthesis more relevant than it was in Nehru's treatment of the role of Islam and Muslims in Indian history.

The Positive Impact of Islam and Muslims on India

Discussing the Muslim conquests of northern India while almost assuredly also thinking about India under the British, Nehru wrote in *The Discovery of India* that "a foreign conquest, with all its evils, has one advantage: it widens the mental horizon of the people and compels them to look out of their shells. They realize that the world is a much bigger and more variegated place than they had imagined."[24] Nehru extolled the "brilliant culture" of the first Arab Muslim conquerors and praised "their vast energy from the dynamic and revolutionary character of their Prophet and his message of human brotherhood."[25] Even nearly a decade earlier in *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru had praised Islam for its "flavor of democracy and equality" and for "put[ting] an end to many old abuses."[26] The radical change Islam brought to India was "vitality and an

22 Nehru references Jews a couple of times in passing but does not really discuss them in depth. He makes far more references to Arabs and dedicates several pages to them, so I have to presume he is largely (but not exclusively) talking about Arabs. The term "Semite" used here is Nehru's wording on the page cited below (see note 23), not my own choice.

23 Ibid., 146.

24 Ibid., 278.

25 Ibid., 242–243.

26 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), 168.

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impulse for progress in a society which was becoming wholly unprogressive."[27] Reflecting on the decline of India before the Muslim conquest of North India, Nehru remarked that Indian civilization had decayed from the inside long before the arrival of Islam and that India needed a new stimulus to awaken it from its lethargy. Islam provided that stimulus by "unbinding the fetters of the intellect and releasing fresh energy" into Indian society.[28]

One of the key ways in which Nehru argued that Islam improved India was by calling into question the inequalities and injustices embedded in Hinduism. Islam made apparent the deep inequalities of Hindu society, such as the petrified caste system and untouchability. Islam, Nehru noted, with its message of the brotherhood and equality of all believers, was particularly attractive to Hindus who were the victims of the injustices and humiliations of the caste system. Islam's egalitarian spirit logically led to a massive wave of conversions, especially in lower castes. Nehru underscored, however, that a fair number of individuals from upper castes also converted, either because of genuine faith or because of more material, pragmatic concerns.[29,30]

In any case, Nehru observed, "from this ideological impact grew up various movements aiming at a religious synthesis."[31] Throughout India, the collision of Hinduism and Islam created a new intellectual ferment in India, as the country reacted to and absorbed ideas brought by Muslims to the subcontinent. This transformation pushed India in a more progressive direction, creating a hospitable environment for the emergence of religious reformers who were proponents of religious synthesis and condemned the injustices of the caste system. Nehru listed some of India's greatest social and religious reformers and freethinkers who embodied the synthesis of Islamic and Hindu ideas, including Ramanand (~1300–1380 to ~1400–1475), Kabir (1398–1448 or 1440–1518), and Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism. Even more crucially, instead of only influencing their co-religionists, "the influence of these reformers went

27 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 242.

28 Ibid., 284.

29 Ibid., 286.

30 There is extremely little data, however, because most of these conversions took place long before this kind of data was being collected. While precise figures for these conversions are not available, the details that we do have are telling. An 1872 British census of Bengal – the only region outside of the western flank of the Indian subcontinent to have a Muslim majority – reported that 70.4% of Bengali Muslims came from formerly non-Muslim families that had converted to Islam. Of that 70.4%, 70% were formerly lower-caste Hindus, compared to only 30% for upper-caste Hindus and Buddhists. MD Shah Noorur Rahaman, "Islam and its early introduction in Bengal," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 56 (1995): 433.

31 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 286.

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far beyond the limits of the particular sects that grew up after them," leading to an exchange of ideas that served to highlight shortcomings in the religious practices of each community.[32] All of India's religions, including Islam, felt the impact of this synthesis which moderated and reformed them. Observing the reciprocal nature of the intellectual exchange between religions, Nehru noted that at the same time that the monotheism of Islam influenced Hinduism, the pantheism of Hinduism influenced the practice of Islam in South Asia, especially because most Indian Muslims converted from Hinduism. In particular, Hinduism's devotional and mystic traditions paved the way for the rapid spread of Sufism and Islamic mysticism throughout the subcontinent.[33]

Presenting a contrasting image to that of the intolerant Muslim zealot ruler peddled by Hindu nationalists, Nehru sought to emphasize in *The Discovery of India* the degree to which this cultural synthesis took place because of the support of Muslim rulers. This cultural synthesis did not just take place in one Muslim state but was a broader trend over the course of several centuries. Citing one of many examples, Nehru mentioned the Jaunpur Sultanate, which became a cultural and artistic center whose rulers encouraged the development of Hindustani, with its blend of Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit words, as well as attempts to bring Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs closer together. In Kashmir, a Muslim monarch, Zain-ul-Abidin (1395–1470), was famous for his tolerance of Hindus and his interest in preserving Sanskrit texts and the pre-Islamic Hindu culture of the region.[34] Yet of the various Muslim rulers who promoted this cultural synthesis, Nehru reserved his greatest praise for the man he referred to as the father of Indian nationalism, the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605).

Akbar incarnated the spirit of India for Nehru more than almost any other figure discussed in *The Discovery of India*. As Nehru wrote, "in him the old dream of a united India again took shape, united not only politically in one state but organically fused into one people."[35] Akbar not only respected other religions but went as far as marrying a Rajput princess, and thus his son and successor, Jehangir (1569–1627), was ethnically half-Rajput. Jehangir also married a Rajput princess, and thus his son, Shah Jahan (1592–1666), was ethnically more Rajput than Turco-Mongol. For Nehru, this practice of intermarriage in the Mughal Empire underscored the extent to which the Mughals shed their foreignness and integrated into the fabric of Indian society.[36] Indeed, the power of the Mughals

32 Ibid., 262.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 279.
36 Ibid.

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depended on close cooperation with the Hindu Rajputs. The cooperation between them not only involved governmental affairs but also seeped into art and culture. The Mughal elite became increasingly Indian over time while the Rajputs absorbed influences from Persian culture brought by the Mughals, thus continuing the blending and fusion of Hindu and Islamic cultures.[37] The result of Akbar's policy of toleration and synthesis was, in Nehru's eyes, an unqualified success, "for he created a sense of oneness among the diverse elements of north and central India," realizing that dream of unity in diversity that was at the core of Nehru's reading of India's history.[38]

Akbar's reign also saw an intellectual renaissance that was defined by the toleration of different beliefs and the encouragement of debate and synthesis. Nehru described Akbar's court as "a meeting place for men of all faiths and all who had some new idea or new invention," even when doing so irritated the conservative Muslim establishment, the *'ulama*. In a sign of just how committed he was to blending Hindu and Islamic ideas, he attempted to found a new religion, the Din-i Ilahi, which borrowed heavily from Islam and Hinduism but also included elements taken from Jainism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Because of his balanced, fair, and open rule, Nehru claimed, Akbar was equally popular among Hindus and Muslims, and his policies favored the deepening of a common, syncretic culture shared by both groups. It was thus during his reign that the Mughals, a foreign Muslim dynasty, "became firmly established as India's own."[39] Writing in *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru went so far as to say that because of his commitment to creating a united India out of its immense diversity, Akbar could even be considered the father of Indian nationalism – a version of nationalism built around tolerance and an amalgamation of different cultural influences. At a moment when religion was the central fault line in Indian society, "Akbar deliberately placed the ideal of a common Indian nationhood above the claims of separatist religion."[40] While Akbar was certainly not a democrat (Nehru once called him "the very essence of authoritarianism"), Nehru found in him a useful figure in whom he could anchor his eclectic, democratic, pluralistic nationalism in India's past.[41] His reign embodied the reasons for which Nehru thought that Islam and Muslims had enriched Indian society and had become an integral part of an indivisible Indian nation.

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 291.
39 Ibid., 280.
40 Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, 356–357.
41 Ibid., 361.

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Even should Hindus and Muslims want to separate from each other, the eclectic culture that was born of the interaction between them was impossible to disaggregate because of India's tendency to create indelible unity out of diverse influences, a tendency illustrated by Nehru's palimpsest metaphor. Nehru noted that those who came to India with religions born outside of the Indian subcontinent integrated quickly, and within a few generations, their families were culturally distinctively Indian.[42] He also observed that Christians and Muslims who had arrived in India adjusted to Indian culture and became Indian without converting to a religion born in India.[43] Thus, in this tacit but firm rebuke of Hindu nationalist ideas, Nehru argued that cultural markers of Indianness – which are not the same as adherence to a Dharmic religion – are what matters in determining whether one is Indian, not where one's ancestors or one's religion came from. Furthermore, compounding this problem for Hindu nationalists, the vast majority of Indian Muslims were descendants of local converts from Hinduism. These Muslims never ceased being Indian simply because they had changed their religion, as their culture, language, and worldview largely remained the same.[44] Due to the conversion of many Hindus to Islam and the continuous interaction between Hindus and Muslims, both religious groups "developed numerous common traits, habits, ways of living and artistic tastes . . . in music, painting, architecture, food, clothes, and common traditions."[45] Far away from the battles of the elites, Muslims and Hindus "lived together peacefully as one people," speaking the same languages, sharing the same culture, attending each other's festivals, and dealing with the same economic challenges.[46] Thus, according to Nehru, the abstract notion that Hindus and Muslims are two peoples, as claimed both by Hindu and Muslim ideologues, is not borne out by the religious and cultural synthesis visible in the lives of ordinary Indians. Nehru shared this vision with other defenders of a pluralistic India, such as the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).[47]

One of the most visible products of the interaction between Islamic civilization and pre-Islamic Indian civilization is Indo-Islamic architecture, which blended Indian and Persian influences, producing some of India's most beautiful buildings and monuments in cities such as Delhi and Agra. The most notable example of Indo-Islamic architecture, for Nehru, was the Taj Mahal, which,

42 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 55.
43 Ibid., 71.
44 Ibid., 289, 55.
45 Ibid., 289.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 242.

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quoting the French historian René Grousset, he praised as "the soul of Iran incarnate in the body of India."[48] Indeed, the arrival of Islam gave new impetus to Indian art and architecture, revitalizing them and freeing them from the rigid, decadent, overly elaborate styles of the past.[49] Developing this idea further in *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru wrote that old Hindu art, which had grown "decadent and morbid," gave way to a new, fresh Indo-Islamic artistic style "full of energy and vitality."[50] This Indo-Islamic style was incarnated by new elegant structures "combining the old Indian ideals in architecture with a new simplicity and a nobility of line." It also contrasted with what Nehru deemed to be "the decadent, over-elaborate and heavily ornamented" buildings and temples constructed before the arrival of Islam.[51] A magnificent blend of Hindu and Islamic, simple and ornate, Indo-Islamic architecture embodied for Nehru the interaction of Islam and Hinduism at its most fruitful.

The revitalization of Indian culture did not take place just in the realms of architecture and visual arts. A broader movement toward synthesis took place throughout Indian society in clothing, cuisine, and music, where the meeting of Hindu and Islamic civilizations produced new musical forms and styles.[52] It is important to note that there is no discussion of Islamic civilization supplanting Hindu civilization in *The Discovery of India*. Instead, Nehru focussed on the blending and amalgamation of different cultural traditions to create something new and forward-looking while still maintaining a sense of continuity with the past.

Although Nehru did not dwell extensively on the topic in *The Discovery of India*, language is another key element through which we can see how Nehru envisioned this process of cultural synthesis. The arrival of Muslim rulers, and the introduction of Persian as the official language of government, led to the growing use of Perso-Arabic words in Indian languages, which facilitated the development of the modern colloquial languages of North India.[53] Indeed, the development of contemporary colloquial languages was "perhaps the most significant indication of the growing absorption of the foreign element in India."[54] India's languages, however, despite the new Islamic influence, maintained their core Indianness that connected them to the past. Nehru noted that

48 Ibid., 152.
49 Ibid., 279.
50 Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, 242.
51 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 286.
52 Ibid., 260.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 262.

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even the most Islamic Indian language, Urdu, with its modified Arabic script and heavy lexical borrowings from Arabic and Persian, belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family like almost all other North Indian languages, and its vocabulary "probably contains 80 per cent words derived from Sanskrit." Even then, he noted that it is quite often challenging to determine whether a word in Urdu or Hindi comes from Persian or Sanskrit, as both languages are closely related and share common root words, underscoring the historical links between Iran and India that existed long before the advent of Islam.[55]

Under Muslim rule, and especially under the Mughals, Nehru described a literary renaissance in northern India during which Hindus wrote countless works in Persian while Muslim scholars attempted to translate Sanskrit texts into Persian and wrote books and poetry in Hindi.[56] Among the Muslim writers in Hindi, Nehru singled out Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), an ethnic Turk whose family had integrated into the culture of North India over the course of two or three generations and who was proficient in both Persian and Sanskrit, as well as the social reformer Kabir.[57]

Addressing the controversy over whether Hindi and Urdu constitute one language or two, Nehru came down firmly on the side of both being "one language with two literary forms and two scripts."[58] Noting that there is no gap between colloquial Hindi and Urdu and that the only differences appear at the literary level, he made the case, which is accurate from a purely linguistic perspective, that the differences between Hindi and Urdu are fundamentally differences in higher registers used by elites who seek to ground their works either in India's Islamic or Hindu heritage, whereas there is no distinction between the two in the daily lives of most Indians. He praised efforts to resist the separation of Hindi and Urdu (and, symbolically, of Indian Hindus and Muslims) through attempts to develop a common, standardized Hindustani, which reflected "a common language understood all over India" by average Indians rather than an arcane register only used by a small community of religious zealots and literati.[59] In language, art, architecture, literature, and music, Nehru sought to underline India's tendency to absorb different influences – especially from the Islamic world – and produce from them a vibrant, eclectic culture. He thus urged Hindus and Muslims to acknowledge and embrace their rich, shared cultural past instead of tearing it apart.

55 Ibid., 174.
56 Ibid., 290.
57 Ibid., 262–263.
58 Ibid., 176.
59 Ibid.

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Did Islam Come to India by the Sword?

One of the notions spread by Hindu nationalists that Nehru wanted to combat was the idea that Islam had been a violent and destructive force in India since the very moment of its arrival. Islam, Nehru pointedly noted, arrived through Arab traders centuries before it came as a military and political force to India. Long before Mahmud of Ghazni's destructive invasions (1001–1027), missionaries came and mosques were built because, in keeping with India's tradition of cultural syncretism, "it was the old tradition of India to be tolerant to all faiths and forms of worship."[60] The first problems began when Mahmud of Ghazni (971–1030) invaded northwestern India in campaigns of wanton violence, disrupting the process through which Islam had come peacefully to India over more than three hundred years and had blended seamlessly into the fabric of Indian society without conflict.[61] During one of his campaigns, Mahmud destroyed the Somnath temple in Gujarat, an act that would form a lasting part of the Hindu nationalist narrative of Islam's malignant impact on India. Nevertheless, Nehru emphasized that the actions of Mahmud should not and cannot be taken as representative of Islam or Muslims as a whole. As Nehru wrote, "Mahmud was far more a warrior than a man of faith and like many other conquerors he used and exploited the name of religion for his conquests. India was to him just a place from which he could carry off treasure and material to his homeland."[62] The non-religious nature of Mahmud's campaigns of plunder was further underscored for Nehru by the fact that he recruited Indians into his army, and one of his leading generals, Tilak, was an Indian Hindu. Tilak then helped Mahmud lead campaigns against Muslims in Central Asia.[63] Mahmud was thus not a religious fanatic attempting to kill non-Muslims, but rather an amoral warlord.

The misconception that Mahmud or later conquerors like Alauddin Khilji (1296–1316) represented Islam is something that Nehru had earlier directly refuted in his *Glimpses of World History*, saying that "while Islam brought an element of progress to India, the Muslim Afghans brought an element of barbarism," and Indians should be careful not to confuse the two.[64] For Nehru, it is wrong to impute the actions of individuals to entire religions. Even if religion was used as a pretext,

60 Ibid., 244.
61 Ibid., 253.
62 Ibid., 251.
63 Ibid., 251.
64 Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, 247.

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the true causes of violence were always political and social.[65] The Turks and Afghans who invaded India were, for Nehru, "fierce and merciless" warriors long before their conversion to Islam and knew only one way of maintaining control of conquered territory: terror.[66] Irreparable damage had nevertheless been done, for once Islam arrived in the form of a violent invading army, it produced a backlash and a sense of bitterness that sowed the seeds of mistrust and animosity between Hindus and Muslims in later years.[67] Yet, in time, even violent foreign conquerors were absorbed into India's culture of syncretism.[68] It was through this process of cultural synthesis that Islam and Muslims became interwoven in the tapestry of Indian society, enriching it and revitalizing it at a time when Indian civilization seemed to have lost its way.

If Akbar was the paragon of the spirit of Hindu-Muslim synthesis, his great-grandson Aurangzeb (1618–1707) – for whom Nehru seems to have had nothing but utter contempt – was its antithesis. Because of Aurangzeb's actions, Nehru believed, Akbar's spirit of unity was ultimately fleeting, and his descendant's bigotry destroyed much of the progress and goodwill built under his rule. Aurungzeb, Nehru sardonically remarked, "far from understanding the present, failed even to appreciate the immediate past." Unlike Akbar, he was a bigoted zealot with no appreciation for art or literature. After the tolerant reigns of Akbar and the two subsequent Mughal emperors, Aurangzeb "tried to put back the clock, and in this attempt stopped it and broke it up."[69] His rule spelled disaster for the Mughals, who were successful, Nehru claimed, only when they placed a common sense of Indianness and unity among Hindus and Muslims above sectarian politics. When Aurungzeb began to tear apart the unity between Hindus and Muslims and started acting more as a Muslim than an Indian ruler, the Mughal Empire began to fall apart. As Akbar's tolerance and synthesis gave way to narrow-minded fanaticism, nationalist movements among non-Muslims rose to challenge the Mughal state.[70] The chaos that ensued enfeebled Indian unity both at a political level and at a deeper level, as animosity between religious groups began to re-emerge in the face of oppression.

Nehru faulted Aurangzeb for needlessly reimposing the *jizya* tax on non-Muslims abolished by Akbar and for alienating the Rajputs upon whom Akbar's state had depended. Aurangzeb also managed to provoke the ire of the Sikhs

65 Ibid., 242.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 179.
68 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 258.
69 Ibid., 286.
70 Ibid.

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and the Marathas, who rebelled against Mughal oppression.[71] The disintegration of Indian unity and the Mughal Empire caused by Aurangzeb left India "weak and helpless" in the face of the British, who, "almost unnoticed by others . . . helping one rival against another," managed to gain a foothold in India that proved irreversible. By the time Indians realized that the British had played them off against each other, it was already too late.[72] Implicit in this account of the colonization of India and the disintegration of the Mughal Empire that happened two centuries prior is a lesson that remained just as relevant when Nehru was writing *The Discovery of India* in the 1940s: religious factionalism would weaken Indians and strengthen the British, while only a feeling of "common living and common purpose" could lead India to freedom.[73]

Islam's Place in India's Past and Present

Nehru took issue with the traditional divisions in both Hindu and Muslim nationalist readings of history, as well as those in works of history published by colonial historians. As Romila Thapar notes, "the Hindutva version of history is . . . largely a revival of nineteenth-century colonial history," which divided Indian history into three distinct eras: the classical Hindu period, the Muslim period, and the British period. In the Hindu nationalist reading of history, she writes, "the Hindu period is regarded as the golden age, the Muslim period the dark age of tyranny and oppression, and there is relative neutrality about the colonial period," whereas, in the Muslim version, Indian history before Islam is a period of darkness and the era of Muslim rule is a golden age of prosperity.[74] In both cases, these neat divisions allow for a simplistic reading of history emphasizing a near-Manichaean battle between Hindus and Muslims that became a fundamental part of the divisive religious nationalisms that sought to tear India apart.[75]

By objecting to the notion that the Muslim presence in India ever amounted to a foreign occupation, Nehru upset that narrative of India's past. He claimed that "this division is neither intelligent nor correct; it is deceptive and gives a

71 Ibid., 293.
72 Ibid., 299–300.
73 Ibid., 44.
74 Romila Thapar, "Secularism, History, Contemporary Politics," in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, eds. Anuradha Dingawaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 194.
75 Ibid.

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wrong perspective," especially as it makes the Muslims and the British both seem to be foreign occupying powers of a land that is fundamentally Hindu at its core. While that characterization may be true of the British, the Muslims were certainly not a foreign power in the eyes of Nehru – they continued India's tradition of absorbing and synthesizing peoples, cultures, and ideas. The Muslim invaders, like all their predecessors, such as the Aryans, "became absorbed into India and part of her life. Their dynasties became Indian dynasties and there was a great deal of racial fusion by intermarriage. A deliberate effort was made, apart from a few exceptions, not to interfere with the ways and customs of the people. They looked to India as their home country and had no other affiliations."[76] Because the Muslims, unlike the British, integrated into Indian society and became Indian, all while making their distinctive contribution to it, India remained an independent country throughout the centuries of Muslim rule.[77] Islam's arrival in India did not cause a break with India's pre-Islamic past. Rather, it was just one more addition to the culture of a country that was already defined by its synthesis of different cultures.

Even more than being simply one influence among many, Islam was, for Nehru, a force of civilizational renewal in India. With its message of human brotherhood and its democratic spirit, it pointed out the evils of the caste system and helped make an increasingly stagnant, inward-looking society open and progressive. The era of fruitful interaction between Hinduism and Islam embodied by figures such as Akbar, Kabir, and Guru Nanak left a powerful legacy that gives Nehruvian secular democracy a sense of continuity with the past. One of the leading defenders of Nehru's vision of India today, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, writes about the importance for Nehru's democratic Indian state of "Akbar's sponsorship and support for dialogues between adherents of different faiths. . . . In the deliberative conception of democracy, the role of open discussion, with or without sponsorship by the state, has a clear relevance."[78] Additionally, with his firm stance in favor of religious tolerance and pluralism, Sen notes, Akbar "laid the formal foundations of a secular legal structure and of religious neutrality of the state."[79] If Hindu nationalists attempt to reach into the past to demonstrate why Hindus and Muslims can never peacefully coexist, the goal of Nehru and Sen is quite the opposite: to show how

76 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 254.

77 Ibid.

78 Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006), 16.

79 Ibid., 18.

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tolerance, pluralism, open debate, and cultural synthesis are fundamental parts of India's past and that Islam and Muslims contributed immensely to that heritage.

Nehru also claims that Islam led to a cultural renaissance characterized by flourishing languages, music, art, and architecture in India. The idea of an Islamic contribution to Indian culture and society is an idea that has been carried forward by other defenders of a secular, democratic, plural India, such as Sen. Surveying the same cultural legacy of Hindu-Muslim interaction, Sen notes that it is difficult to avoid "seeing the contributions of constructive efforts that have defied the alleged barriers of religious communities" in literature, music, food, and architecture.[80]

In *The Discovery of India,* Nehru managed to create a unique vision of the relationship between religion, culture, and power. It was neither a vision that placed the individual above all else, dismissing the role that cultural and religious identities play in ordinary life or believing that religious divisions could be made to disappear from society, nor was it one that characterized religious groups as hermetic and immutable monoliths moving through time. This last option, that of an irreconcilable and complete separation of religious groups, could lead to two outcomes, both of which Nehru wanted to avoid: either the creation of a state to protect minority interests while affirming the fundamental differences between Hindus and Muslims that made them incompatible, or a form of illiberal majoritarian democracy in which a Hindu majority would remake India according to its vision of what Hindu civilization had been before it was rendered impure by foreign Muslim influence. As Khilnani notes, for Nehru, "India was a society neither of liberal individuals nor of exclusive communities or nationalities, but of interconnected differences," of an unbreakable unity in all its diversity, and it was this belief that India belonged just as much to Muslims as it did Hindus that guided him throughout his political life.[81] It is perhaps for this reason that Nehru writes in *The Discovery of India* that although the INC "wanted unity . . . and took it for granted . . . it saw no reason why the richness and variety of India's cultural life should be regimented after a single pattern."[82]

It is also important to consider how extraordinary Nehru's vision was for his time. If multiculturalism is today a growing (if contested) norm around the world, in Nehru's age, as the last multi-ethnic empires crumbled and ethnically homogenous nation-states emerged from their blood-soaked ashes, his vision of a plural national identity that embraced people across religious and ethnic

80 Ibid., 57.
81 Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2012), 172.
82 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 422–423.

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lines was almost unheard of. Neither European history nor any other history had given Nehru a model from which to build a pluralistic democratic state. Almost all existing democratic states at that time were tied to exclusive religious or cultural identities that would have been disastrous for his efforts to build an inclusive Indian patriotism.[83] Because he knew what destruction exclusive nationalism had wrought in Europe, Nehru fashioned his model of an inclusive, democratic nationalism founded on a narrative of Indian history that emphasized cultural synthesis, especially between Muslims and Hindus, as a common theme throughout India's past. As Khilnani notes, unlike previous works on Indian history, *The Discovery of India* presents Indian history neither "as a meaningless dust-storm nor as a glorified Hindu pageant," but rather as a past "moved by a logic of accommodation and acceptance."[84]

Based on the narrative of the fruitful interaction between Islam and Hinduism presented throughout *The Discovery of India*, Nehru writes that the protection of the rights of all religious, linguistic, and cultural groups in a democratic, egalitarian independent India was never a question for him. He emphasizes that these were not ideas emerging entirely from Europe, because "the whole history of India was witness of the toleration and even encouragement of minorities and of different racial groups. . . . So we did not have to go abroad for ideas of religious and cultural toleration; *these were inherent in Indian life*."[85] For Muslims worried about their place in an independent, Hindu-majority India in an age of increasing majoritarian politics, Nehru's assertion that they all belonged to one Indian nation was an attempt to soothe their anxieties. For right-wing Hindus who claimed that Islam and Muslims were an unwelcome, corrupting influence on India, Nehru replied that not only was their account of Hindu-Muslim relations over the centuries simplistic, but it was also simply wrong. Muslims had made immense contributions to Indian culture and had become an integral part of the fabric of Indian society. To assert that they were still somehow foreigners who needed to accept the supremacy of Hindu civilization was not only discriminatory, but the justification for that assertion was also belied by Indian history. In essence, by giving Hindus and Muslims a vision of a shared past of cultural synthesis and harmony, he was also implicitly urging them to imagine a common future together as one people.

83 Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 171–172.
84 Ibid., 169.
85 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 420.

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Conclusion

Like all imagined communities, Nehru's India contains plenty of exaggeration, and he molded history by emphasizing certain elements and downplaying others to serve his interests. Yet, unlike so many other nations imagined into existence by other nationalist writers, both in India and in other countries, the nation Nehru imagined into existence is not defined by a hermetically sealed essence that can be traced back until the nation disappears into the mists of time. Nehru's India is simultaneously constant and yet continuously evolving with the influences that shaped it. It is inherently united, but its unity is not homogeneity. Furthermore, if Nehru recognized differences between Hindus and Muslims, he did not seek solely to protect them from each other while affirming their inherent differences. Instead, he tried to imagine a common past of fruitful interaction between Hinduism and Islam without which the mosaic of Indian civilization would not be nearly as rich and beautiful, a past built on what Khilnani calls "interconnected differences."[86] It is this seemingly contradictory formula, according to which India's unity is its diversity and the unchanging essence of Indian culture is incessant change and synthesis, that allowed Nehru to make an impassioned plea for tolerance and harmony. It also helped him remind Indians that what they had in common was far greater than that which divided them and that the boundaries between them were never fixed and impermeable but rather fluid and open.

Although partition took place in 1947 despite Nehru's best efforts to avert it, his years as prime minister demonstrated his commitment to making Muslims see that they were full-fledged citizens of India, and Nehru succeeded to a very large extent. Despite all its potential religious and ethnic fault lines, India has managed to sustain democracy while avoiding further fragmentation, and India today boasts a Muslim population nearly as large as that of Pakistan. The success of India's democracy – which is unprecedented for a country of such religious and ethnic diversity – testifies to the strength of the inclusive Nehruvian nationalism on which it was built, even if it has since come under increasing strain. In an age when exclusionary nationalism is again ascendant in India and much of the world, it is essential to reflect on how Nehru imagined a nation into being that celebrated diversity instead of disdaining it, laying the foundation for the greatest democratic experiment ever undertaken in human history.

86 Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 172.

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The Discovery of India was received quite favorably at the time of its release, and it remains ubiquitous in Indian bookstores and continues to be printed to this day. *The Discovery of India*'s greatest influence, however, might be through *Bharat Ek Khoj*, a serialized television adaptation produced in the late 1980s. In a society with a relatively small reading public, *Bharat Ek Khoj* has brought Nehru's ideas to Indian homes since its release in 1988, giving Nehru's ideas a broader reach than would be possible just with books. Curiously, *Bharat Ek Khoj* has not appeared on Indian public television since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014. The last re-run took place in late 2013 to commemorate the anniversary of Nehru's death, just a year before Modi took office. This absence has occurred despite Indian public television re-running many other popular serials from the 1980s, particularly during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.[87] The attempt to reduce the visibility of *Bharat Ek Khoj* is just one of many ways in which Modi and the BJP have sought to obscure Nehru's ideas and his contribution to contemporary Indian history. The BJP government has sought to purge references to Nehru from history textbooks,[88] omitted him from history exhibits on the Indian independence movement, and even proposed transforming his own museum – the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi – into a museum honoring all of India's prime ministers.[89] The BJP's efforts have been part of a larger attempt to rewrite Indian history and change public perceptions of the country's past to justify the current government's anti-Muslim stance.[90]

These actions show that the BJP, like Nehru, realizes the power of narratives of the past to justify political agendas in the present. The ultimate success of Modi's Hindu nationalist populism will depend on how well he can rally ordinary Indians to his versions of Indian history and Indian identity. This task, of course, is complicated by a rival Indian nationalism, one that runs through every page of *The Discovery of India*. The ideas Nehru articulated in *The Discovery of India* represent a grave threat to Hindu nationalists' attempts to rewrite Indian history into a simple narrative of Muslim aggression and Hindu victimhood, a fact that the BJP has tacitly acknowledged by taking *Bharat Ek Khoj* off the air.

87 Prakash Bhandari, "When Will Prasar Bharti Allow Telecast of 'Bharat Ek Khoj'?," *National Herald* (New Delhi), May 10, 2020.

88 Christophe Jaffrelot, *L'Inde de Modi: national-populisme et démocratie ethnique* (Paris: Fayard, 2019), 178.

89 Sushil Aaron, "The Nehru India Cannot Forget," *The Wire*, November 14, 2020.

90 See Jaffrelot, *L'Inde de Modi*, especially 174–179.

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In contrast to the distaste for nationalism among many on the left today, Nehru realized not only that nationalism was "inevitable" and "one of the most powerful urges to move a people," but that it did not always have to feed the flames of hatred and division.[91] By imagining an Indian national community built around cultural syncretism, Nehru showed that nationalism can be built on – and foster – inclusion and diversity. At a time when the BJP has taken to calling opponents of its Hindu nationalist agenda "anti-national," *The Discovery of India* reminds us that there is nothing "anti-national" about arguing for tolerance and pluralism in India, especially regarding India's Muslim minority. Indeed, from Nehru's perspective, it would be difficult to imagine a higher form of Indian nationalism than protecting the rich tapestry of India's diverse and pluralistic culture from the forces that are trying to rip it apart.

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91 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 44.

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